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GIVE ME YOUR CRIMINALS

By Jack Ritchie

I GLARED at the control board. We had been tracking Dr. Wallace's ship ever since it had re-entered our solar system, and it was due to land within an hour. "Haven't we got enough criminals on Earth without Wallace bringing back a whole ship-load?"

"But the Orphezians were going to execute them, sir," Thompson said.

"That's their business, not ours." I ground out my cigarette. "How long has it been since Earth abolished the death penalty?"

"Seventy years," Thompson said.

"Then it's about time we revived it. If I were in command of that ship, I'd leave the cargo floating in space. Let's hope that Wallace has sense enough to do just that before he gets here."

"I rather doubt he would do anything of the kind, sir," Thompson said. "Dr. Wallace is rather known for his . . . ah . . . reverence for life. No matter what kind of life it is."

I turned back to the board. "Dammit, I wish we could just talk with him."

Thompson agreed. "Unfortunately we have just the one message from Or-

phezia, and it's obvious that that was recorded—and possibly censored—before it was transmitted."

I sighed. "Well, let's hear it again. Maybe there's something we missed."

Thompson started the tape and we listened to Dr. Wallace's voice.

"After a slight initial misunderstanding regarding the motive for our presence, the Orphezians have proven to be friendly and cooperative."

I smiled faintly. What Wallace probably meant was that when his ship had landed on Orphezia, the inhabitants had promptly destroyed the ship's communications system. Which accounted for the fact that even now, as the ship approached Earth, we were still unable to make live contact.

"Orphezian evolution has followed a path almost identical to that of Earth. The Orphezians and the inhabitants of Earth could be interchanged without the slightest difficulty."

I stopped the recording. "That part about 'could be interchanged without the slightest difficulty.' What do you make of that?"

"I don't know, sir," Thompson said. "But perhaps we ought to have Dr. Wallace's fingerprints and those of his crew members ready when the craft returns. Just for comparison."

I raised an eyebrow. "Aren't you thinking a little wild, Thompson? Are you expecting some kind of wholesale substitution?"

"Perhaps not, sir. But on the other hand we are responsible for security and we might as well anticipate even the fantastic."

I turned on the machine again.

"Politically, however, the Orphezians are considerably advanced. They have consolidated their government under the more efficient One Leader principle."

I grinned. "My, how Wallace has changed. I always thought he was happy with our bumbling democratic form of world government."

Thompson shook his head. "I don't think Dr. Wallace has changed, sir. However, when in Orphezia, do as the Orphezians do. Or at least say what they want to hear."

We let the recording continue.
"The Orphezians live in a highly developed society in which conformity is essential. They are a handsome, healthy people who value athletic prowess highly."

I lit a cigarette. "Well, Thompson, it's the same all over the universe. Give people enough free time and they've either got to think or turn to sports."

"Even in the best of societies, however, there still does exist a small criminal element whose very existence constitutes a threat to any well-organized society. These misfits in Orphezia are allotted seven years for rehabilitation. If, at the end of that time, they have failed to adjust to the norms of the state, they are shipped to a camp in the countryside where they are put to death."

Thompson and I looked at each other, but we said nothing.

"I have spoken to the Orphezian Leader and he has graciously permitted me to bring back a number of these wretches, though he was curious as to what we intended to do with them. I informed him that we intended to use these criminals for experimentation and this he seemed to understand."

Thompson shook his head. "Experiment with. . ."

"Shut up," I said. "Evidently that's what the Leader wanted to hear."

"If we wish to pursue our experiments for any length of time, the Leader has indicated that he will be happy to supply us with further subjects."

The recording ended with information as to when to expect Dr. Wallace's ship to return.

"Well," I said, "I still don't know what to expect. But I want everything set to blow the ship to kingdom come, in case the Orphezians have arranged some kind of an unpleasant surprise package."

And so when Dr. Wallace's ship touched down at three that afternoon, Thompson and I were in the command bunker, the Destruct button within reach.

"Sir," Thompson said, "has it occurred to you that perhaps what the Orphezians call criminals might simply be political or. . ."

"It's occurred to me," I said.

The ship's lower hatch slid open and the passengers came down the ramp.

And some of them walked, and some hobbled, and some were carried. They were the blind, the deformed, the hopelessly ill.

I took my hand away from the Destruct button.

These were the Orphezian criminals—the unloved, the unwanted—and not one of them was over seven years old.

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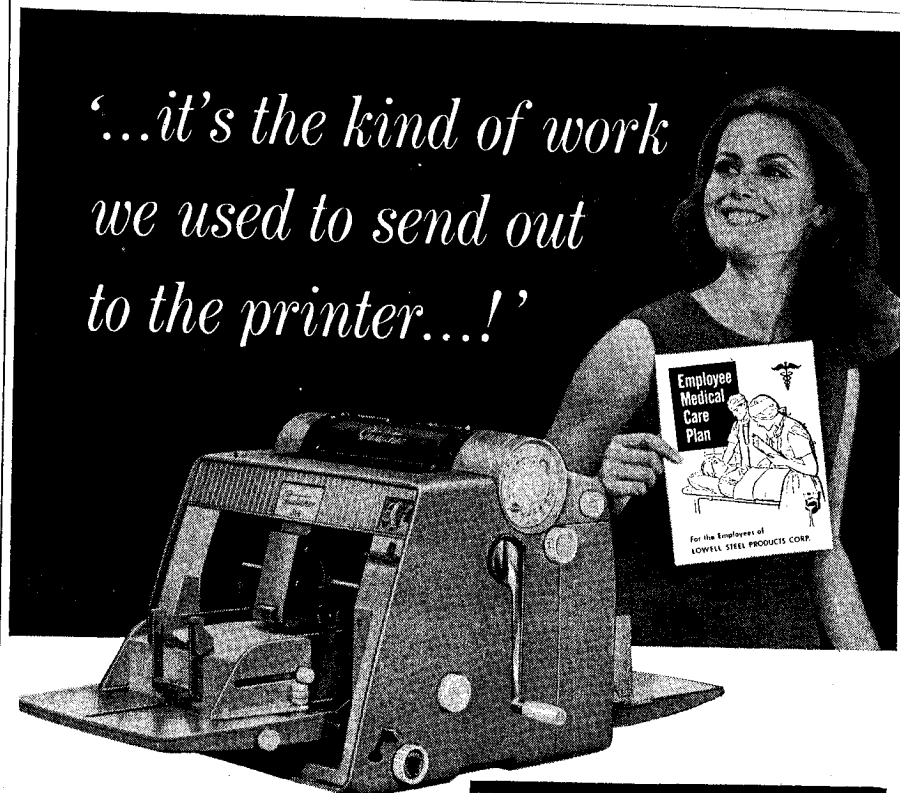
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